

ONTOLOGICA 3.1

SUMMER 2011



ONTOLOGICA

A Journal of Art and Thought

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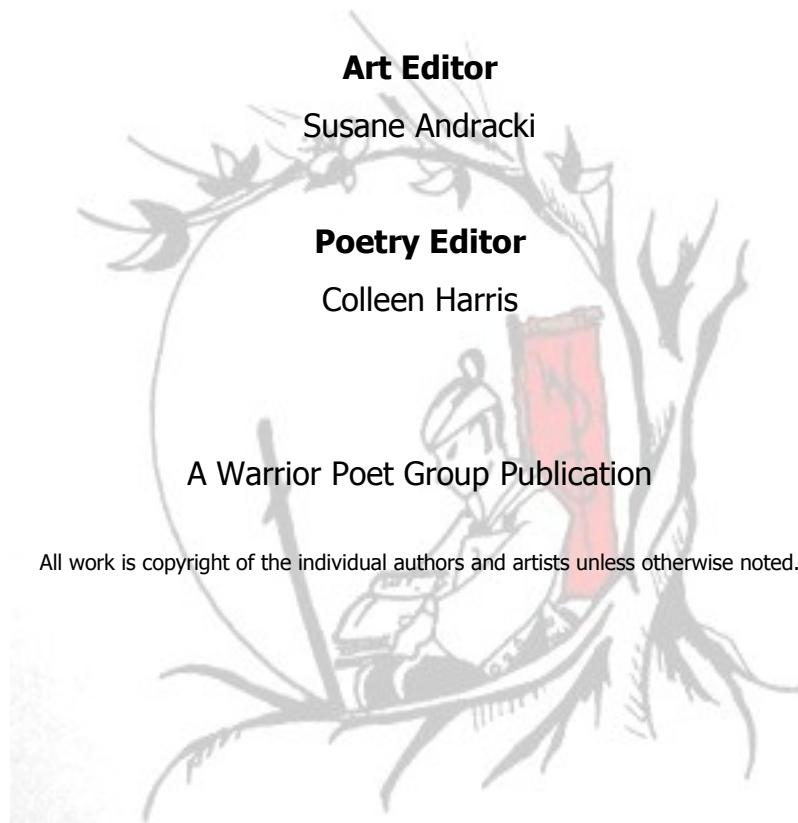
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Issue 3.1 Summer 11

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A Letter from the Editors of *Ontologica*

Another year gone by, and now it's time for the summer issue again. Lots of changes have gone on for us here—we've added Colleen Harris to fill the role of Poetry Editor for the issue. We've also moved away from solicited submissions to an open submission period, which went very well. Well enough, in fact, that we feel that we are now in a strong enough position to begin offering *Ontologica* to the world in a bi-annual release—Summer and Winter. While we don't want to limit ourselves right out of the gate, we're considering running genre heavy from issue to issue, with each issue having a particular focus. This issue, you'll find has a bit more of a poetry bend to it than issues one and two.

As far as the open submission period goes—it's definitely an interesting learning process to say the least. As writers, we know all too well the monotony of sending out submission after submission hoping to catch hold somewhere in a flurry of electronic and mailed paper, but it's easy to forget the other side of the game. It's very tough as an editor to have to pass on a story or essay not because it lacks in quality, but because it strays completely from the guidelines put forth. Granted, we as editors can also fine tune said guidelines, but at the same time, I think we all gained considerable perspective in determining what exactly forms a good submission query.

In any event, we're very happy to bring you this issue, and we look forward to communicating to you again in the Winter.

-The Editors

Carolyn Moore

From the Lecture, “At the Roots of New World Art: The Lithographs of John James Audubon”

Keep in mind, he always worked from death.
He roamed the woods, rifle in lieu of pen,
and shot his birds, then nailed, wired, them in place.

Mammals proved more difficult. The wounds—
entry and exit—from a single blast
might halve a meadow mouse. Still-death prevails

where still-life once sufficed. The next slide, please:
Audubon’s *American Red Fox*.
Note the steel trap. A Newhouse 2 or 3.

No other Audubon litho sports it—though
in anxious times, he hawked all he could paint
in oils of otters poised in this steel embrace.

The artist’s hallmark? This rigor mortis grin:
mouth wide, teeth bared. Even his prairie dogs
smirk this way. Even his gophers flaunt incisors.

Some say this artist was in fact the son,
once dementia snared the father’s mind.
Which explains, perhaps, the modest sums

this picture brings at *auction*, that backwoods tent
that’s pitched each open season on art and craft.

Back to our litho's chief detail and ruse—

this is how you prime a Newhouse trap:
pull the jaws apart, full-smirk. Prime the dog
and thumb it down. Then raise the pan. Next slide.

Karen L. George

Devil's Darning Needles

Fused at tail-ends, they landed on my stanzas. Milliseconds from my mouth. None of us moved. With drawn-out breaths I noted the segmented body, orange and turquoise, the black-veined wings, the leering eyes—transfixed in orgasm or mutual lethal stings? Before I fluttered my fingers and they ascended, I began to believe my poem spawned them—syllables rotted from the inside out.

Jessica Hahn

[Context: This is the second chapter of a memoir-in-progress. I've just dropped out of college, and am about to embark on a trip to New Orleans by freight train with three friends and a dog. We're in Roseville's Jennings Yard, twenty miles northeast of Sacramento, at the largest railroad hub in northern California.]

Sister in the Shadows

October 14, 1995

The absence of city sound was thrilling—no sirens, yammering hordes of people, car horns, jackhammers, radios, TV. *America is the noisiest country that ever existed*, deplored Oscar Wilde, who went on to say, *such continual turmoil must ultimately be destructive to the musical faculties*. It was noisy in the rail yard, all right, but the soulful train horn was musical blues, as was the clanging cadence of freight cars moving down the line, the whoofing whomp of a Southern Pacific engine. There's a smell too, the oily stink of creosote and diesel, the sweet tang of California sagebrush.

Dan, Ben, Shaggy, and I—plus the dog, Germs—were like tiny dots on the edge of Jennings Yard. We marched along Church Street to Pacific Street, and sat behind the secondhand shops and greasy diners, keeping hidden in the coyote brush and fennel. Imagine Jennings as an enormous ganglion cell, its widest girth either the thirty or forty pairs of tracks where trains are received, classified, or set up for departure, and all the lesser sets of tracks are like a tangle of neurons. We decided to wait at the end of the yard, near Pacific and Lincoln Streets, where the railroad tracks made a Y-shape, the left fork pointing to the Oregon border, the right fork to Nevada. We hoped to catch an idling train before it left the yard, but if we had to, we'd catch on the fly.

Dan sewed patches on his pants that were already covered in patches. I watched him cut pieces of dental floss and sew as expertly as a housewife. But he had three Mohawks, tattoos, and looked imposing since he was over six feet tall. Next to him was Ben, short and stocky, the most decorated, his clothes embellished with punk rock

patches, Tibetan skull beads, lighter clips, and the taillights from a BART train. And then there was Shaggy, leaning against his dog and reading a James Bond book. He was a scrawny fellow with an Irish pub cap, one glove, and an ALAMEDA COUNTY JAIL patch on the back of his coat. I sat next to Dan, feeling a little like an imposter, sweating in my black leather pants, sporting no punk rock insignias except hair dyed the color of the ocean, streaked with magenta, and some jewelry on my face.

Dan worked methodically with a long needle. "I can't believe I never came to a train yard," he said, looking at me. "I feel like a puzzle piece that's finally fit."

"I love it here too," I replied, and maybe meant *I'm loving you*.

Ben rolled his eyes and showed us a purple tongue. "Pfff. You guys are making me sick." Ben was the youngest by far. The rest of us were in our early twenties, but Ben was fifteen, a runaway—a liability if he wasn't so smart.

Dan opened his arms. "Do you want a little kiss, Ben?"

Ben shook his stick. He carried this enormous stick, the "Nazi Smasher" he called it. Suddenly he popped up, making all sorts of racket—he had a million jangly pieces of metal hanging off his belt. "Another train! Fuck me, it's going backwards."

Dan set down his sewing and pulled out a packet of Drum. "Rollie?" he asked. Although I wasn't a smoker, I wanted to share whatever Dan offered.

Dan's polite, observant ways surprised me. He liked to say things like thank you and you're welcome, and keep his eyes trained on your face. What amazed me most was his sobriety. Although he'd been on the streets for a few years, he was clean and sober. His only addictions were coffee and cigarettes.

I suggested we play Show and Tell. Ben had a mischievous grin as he showed us his horde of candy—boxes of stuff like Red Hots, chocolate bars, a pack of Hubba Bubba. "You guys can listen to my Walkman," he offered with magnanimous gravity.

Shag pulled a sharp sprinkler head and a skull-shaped candle from out of his backpack. "This is my weapon," he said, brandishing the sprinkler head, and Ben nearly choked on his candy.

"You'll water someone to death?" Ben cried. "Ha! Oh and that candle's gonna be useful on a train."

I showed them a bottle of vitamins, a flashlight, and a long list of phone numbers. Ben's eyes bugged out. "You *typed* them?" he spluttered, and I held my chin up and replied, "It's easier to read."

Dan showed us a bar of soap, grey and fissured. I wouldn't have pegged him as a clean freak, and sure enough, he explained, "This is for putting up my hair." He rattled a bottle of Advil at us, and pulled out a pair of nylon stockings with *SLUT* written all over them. For a second I thought he was gay.

We settled into waiting, but it wasn't so bad. This was a dream come true—my first day out. My mantra of late was something akin to what Ursula K. Leguin said, *The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.* After some time, I said, "It's kind of like Purgatory, waiting here, not knowing when we're going to leave."

Dan nodded. "The trains are like God."

Ben took off his beanie and ran fingers through his blue hair. "So in this Purgatory, the bulls are demons?"

Shag snickered, "They're Satan all right, chasing you, hauling you to jail."

"Sure," I said. "And the workers are angels." My friends gave me incredulous looks.

A short while later, Dan and I crunched across the ballast. A Southern Pacific worker moved along a parked train, uncoupling hoses between cars. He was in his fifties, white haired, with a gut pressing against his overalls and a walkie-talkie crackling on his belt. He saw us waving and cautiously removed his earmuffs and orange hardhat. We asked him about trains heading to Reno.

He said something about a daughter and sighed. "I guess you could follow me," he said, frowning, as he led us across sets of tracks. "Have you done this before?"

"Oh yeah, a few times," I lied.

He pointed at some tracks. "The Reno train will come down these." He glanced at a wristwatch nestled in fur. "At about 2100 hours. But you didn't hear this from me." He smiled and put back on his earmuffs. "Hey kids, look out for the bull."

When the shadows turned long and purple, two hobos trundled up. One was

middle aged, short statured, and hairy as a bear. The other was elderly, in overalls and a cap, with a pipe screwed into a corner of his mouth. "My name's Shorty," the short one said, pooching out his lips under a bristle broom mustache. "This here's Dale. Where ya'll headed?" They were going to Portland, he told us.

"We've been here all day," Ben said, rattling the last Lemonhead out of a box.

Shorty's lips quivered. He was further amused to learn that this was our first day out as a group. "Ah, y'all are novices," he declared. "Well I'm in the FTRA." He hitched back his shoulders. He leaned in. "The Freight Train Riders of America?"

"Wow," I said, frowning. They were notorious, the Hells Angels of homeless men, reputed to throw enemies off speeding trains.

Shorty smiled, big and genuine, and pulled out his tobacco with fingertips coarse as thimbles. He was eager to toss bits and pieces of advice to us greenhorns. He told us what trains to take: "You haven't taken the Highline? Sheesh, *that's* hobo country. Beeutiful!"—and that we should utilize bandanas in long tunnels: "The Cascade Tunnel 'tween Seattle and Spokane is two miles long, and you'll be coughing black gobs"—and how to build a hobo stove: "Take an empty pop can, see, cut the top off sorta jaggedy and punch holes along the bottom with a nail or your knife. You can use pinecones for fuel"—and those precious towns amenable to hobos: "Portland gives you GA and food stamps in a day. Mighty civilized."—and that we ought to visit the Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa. "Next August 13th, you mark your calendar."

Dale ignored us, just smoked his pipe and rocked on his heels, muttering "Son of a biscuit!" whenever a train hurtled by.

For hours, we watched the bull's white Bronco patrol its territory, back and forth, vigilant. The last thing anyone wanted was to be arrested and thrown in some Podunk jail. We sorrowfully watched an eastbound train come and go, as did Shorty and Dale with a perfect northbound ride.

Late that night, long after Shorty and Dale had disappeared, my friends, the dog, and I crept into the yard, blending into shadows. No trains moved anywhere. We were exhausted as we climbed into an open boxcar and fell asleep.

October 15, 1995

It was dawn when we found our train. There were three engines woofing up on the northern end—surely this train was heading for Donner Pass, we thought, and the airbrakes on every car were popping. It was getting ready to pull out, but several parked trains separated us from it.

Climbing across parked trains freaked me out. The steel couplers were like the fists of giants locking into each other, and I had dark fantasies about the train lurching forward and my foot getting smashed. I scrambled like a cat in a swimming pool.

But we got to the train and found a boxcar with open doors. It was cavernous, the length of a Greyhound, empty except for some metal straps. We tossed on our backpacks, Shag grunting as he maneuvered Germs, and long-legged Dan leapt in like a crane. "Here, gimme your hand," he said, his paw in my face. And suddenly I was in, we were in, the A-team, the outlaw posse, every cell in our collective body pistoning alive as the train began to move. We scrunched into a corner and giggled.

Dan's face was beautiful. I wanted to holler and jump. Ben grinned from ear to ear, Shag kissed his dog. The boxcar began to sway from side to side. We were getting out of Roseville, finally. Nothing could stop us! And right at the Y junction, just as we were about to escape the goddamn purgatorial yard, a stranger jumped in.

He was a skinny man with a plaid jacket hanging halfway down his thighs, clutching a greasy paper bag. He had wild, bloodshot eyes. Dan reached for his crowbar. "Are you going all the way to Reno?" I quickly asked the hobo.

"Not Reno," he replied, looking at each of us. "This train's bound for K Falls, Oregon. This train ain't going to Reno."

"Fuck me," cried Shag, yanking up his backpack.

We could've jumped off, but who heads back to Purgatory? "Let's go to Portland," I said to my friends, and Shag gave me a traitorous look. "Two of my best buds live there," I added, "We can visit them. And what does it matter anyways? We're still going someplace."

The skinny hobo opened his greasy bag, and for a second I feared what was inside, but then he asked, "Y'all want some donut holes?"

Ben shot a fist in the air. "Fuck yeah!" The tension disappeared with the taste of sugary dough. But when train slowed, the hobo said goodbye, showed us his five good teeth, and jumped off.

Our train clanged through the outskirts of town like a gargantuan alarm clock. Earplugs would've been smart. "What'd you say?" we hollered, improvising with sign language. I didn't want to talk anyways. I was in a maze of contemplation, filled with a million thoughts, shedding images of the recent past—Telegraph Avenue, Sproul Plaza, the campanile, Harper Street. I was free, and my senses marveled with what I saw, smelled, touched—even the strange taste of tobacco. I was free. *This* was the place for renewal, and even for safety. I trusted myself, for once.

We passed factories of brick and corrugated tin, piles of rubble, scabby lots covered in golden grass and lengths of rail, heaps of masonry and gravel. The sun shone on a homeless man in a bright red jacket, just waking up under some bushes. We passed a power plant surrounded by rolls of barbed wire, and the Blue Diamond almond factory where workers drank coffee at a picnic table in the yard.

We drove alongside a river. There was a man with a thick blonde ponytail, his sleeping bag tied with cord, slung over his shoulder. We pummeled across the metal trestle bridge—*whack whack whack!*—and down rail trails leading through snarls of blackberry bushes. We passed lots filled with broken cars to the east, windshields glinting in the rising sun, and a dark Firebird parked alone to the west. Sparkles danced on irrigation ditches where long-legged birds tiptoed.

We stopped at sidings every couple of miles to let hotshots and Amtraks whizz by. It was the only quiet time, and we just joked.

"What if Cuffy came with us?"

"Oh my Goth. I'd have chucked his coffin-purse off the train."

"How do you get twenty hippies in a phone booth? Throw in a joint. How do you get em out? Throw in a bar of soap."

Dan started to dread my hair by taking long sections, ratting them into snarls, and rubbing the knots between his palms. I took off my *Road Warrior* boots, peeled up my pants, and hugged my bristly shins. Outside was a rolling country, oak trees

growing on golden hills, farms with cows and horses, the I-5 mirroring a river. I hadn't realized how much I needed to be outside, in the elements, in the dirt. I never wanted to shave again, or wear deodorant, or worry about looking pretty. What would my mom say to see me now? Hopefully she'd understand—when she was young, she hitchhiked and wandered too.

We consumed our food—fruit, bread, peanut butter, cheese, a smashed bag of chips, candy bars, tobacco. We glugged water to precarious levels. When I had to take a dump, I waited until a siding and then hopped off with my Ziploc full of TP. Of course I feared the train leaving and me chasing it, bare assed.

At another hole, waiting for an Amtrak to pass, Dan and Shag offered to fill up everyone's bottles. Their running figures receded into the distance, towards a farm. What if the train left? But they came back, laughing about the farmer who threatened them.

At Redding, a town filled with decrepit houses whose backyards looked onto the train tracks, Ben bounced like a jackrabbit. "I need more candy and cigarettes," he cried, and fled to a corner store, every key, bottle opener, and metal do-dad attached to his belt clanging and banging.

"That kid's gonna get us caught," said Shag, using his ungloved hand to blow snot from his nostrils.

For much of the ride we traveled in sight of the freeway, but often a buffer of land ran between us and it with its cars and big rigs. I'd photocopied pages from a Rand McNally Railroad Atlas, and the printed names came alive. Dunsmuir, Weed, Black Butte with its old water tower. Ponderosa pines replaced oak trees; we gained elevation, the rolling hills giving way to cinder cones and mountains, and above all was the white-capped giant, Mount Shasta.

"It's been years since I've been around here," Dan told me.

"What were you doing?" I asked. We were stopped at a siding and were sitting on the edge of the boxcar, our legs dangling over the edge. A river rushed below an embankment, fringed with trees, and Shag and Ben poked around outside, letting Germs stretch his legs and pee. Dan gazed at the mountains on the horizon.

"I was brought to the Trinity Alps when I was like fifteen, back when I was a total fuck-up," he said. "I got clean there—it was the hardest experience I've been through."

"What were you on?" I asked, wondering if this was sort of taboo to ask, like asking a prisoner what he went to jail for.

"Everything," Dan said, opening his arms. "Coke, booze, weed, pills, anything. A lot of speed." He cleared his throat. "But they stuck me in the middle of the Trinity Alps and there was no place to score. They put us to work, on ourselves; it was intense. The guys I met, who went through the program with me, were brothers at the end."

I swung my legs. "Are they still around?"

Dan shrugged. "My friends? We all went our separate ways."

The air brakes began to pop, and Shag and Ben came back, looking like old pros, disheveled, casual, happy. The train pulled out and I thought about how we'd all probably go our separate ways too. I hoped it'd be a long time from now.

Nighttime came with an intense feeling of accomplishment. We were in the northern reaches of the state, in a land of tall trees. The adventure was in full swing. Grease and grime covered me like war paint. Had we traveled for days? I was becoming a different person than who I was a day before.

Shag, Dan and I lay on our backs and looked at the stars. The Milky Way stretched from end to end of the boxcar doorframe. We wondered about the universe, expanding and moving through space, the infinity of galaxies.

"To think we're made of stars," Dan said, and something clicked.

It's easy to forget the cosmos in the city. Thoreau once wrote, *Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them*, which is fitting among skyscrapers, but in the countryside on a noisy train, there's deep contentment under a sky full of stars, and it seemed my whole body sang, watching the black spires of trees whip by, feeling the air chap my lips, smelling the citrusy fragrance of evergreens. Even the train sang squealing songs as the flanges of the wheels pressed against the steel tracks.

Shaggy crawled deep into our metal room to sleep next to Ben and Germs, and

Dan got a sleeping bag to spread under us. We didn't talk, but I was hyper aware of our shoulders touching. A lonely whistle blew. The air was so crisp, my cheeks felt frozen, but my body was warm. Finally it got so icily cold we crawled over and wedged against Shaggy, Ben, and Germs. I turned on my side, wondering about tomorrow, and Dan put an arm around me, curling his hand under my chin. My eyes closed and the boxcar shook me against Dan's chest. There was no rush.

Climate Changes



Burning to Become

August 7, Virginia City to Dillon, Montana (57 miles)

The story in five sentences:

One. Morning the blur of a painting.

Two. Light hits the trees.

Three. Traveling is returning to the familiar.

Four. Olive green to eucalyptus blue.

Five. Everything reminds her of something.

The real story:

Smoldering, steam rose off the hills. The ground glowed white, covered by gumball-sized pellets of melting hail. Scarlet and I caught the tail end of a thunderstorm on the way up and felt the ice on our backs. We'd bicycled to this peak the day after leaving the living ghost town of Virginia City, Montana, through a thunderstorm's pouring sheaths of rain-turned-rock, capsizing in the wind, hollowed out by cold. It took us hours. We wore everything we brought with us: four layers of long underwear, bike shorts, cycling jersey, yoga pants, zip-up fleece pullover, hats and parka. But we were still cold.

We stood at the top of the mountain pass. We rested and smelled water seeping into the summer earth, the thrashed sagebrush and wet asphalt. We watched the crystalline hail sublimate into steam and disappear. The hills appeared indigo blue, the density of water, and the perfect phthalo green of the forest against the white-gray sky. Pine trees, the balmy scent, the branches pelted by hail, their scent lifting. We rode up to this scene and stopped. We'd found the dream we never knew we wanted.

Tears rose. I looked over to Scarlet, a reflection of my 20-something, female self. She smiled, her cheeks red from wind, elements, sunburn. She looked like a rat saved from a shipwreck by the accidental discovery of land. Soaked to the skin but not too

cold because we kept moving. Her chin length hair curled out from under her red polar fleece beanie, her lips slightly purple and the strange glove tan that made her white palms look sickly. We leaned our bikes over onto the dirt edge of the road and dismounted. The tarmac road wound down the mountain. There was only one way to go from here: down.

Twenty-four days earlier, when we first began the bicycle journey from Boulder Colorado, to San Francisco, I never thought about abandoning the trip, my bike, Scarlet. To stop. In the beginning, I never considered the third way. But along the road, doubts appeared during fights over camp sites, food, the thousands of shared decisions made under exhaustion and dehydration, tired, exhausted, all worn out. But all questions disappeared at the top of that anonymous Montana mountaintop of forever. I became water rising up to the sky.

That morning, I'd just been another bike tourist, riding along the black-top interstate from the open plains into the mountains and into the clouds through the thunder and rain. In the afternoon, before the wind started blowing hard, a Ford truck slowed down and stopped next to us as we took a break to eat some M&Ms. Rain drifted heavy onto us already, even though we were still miles from the mountain pass we needed to cross and further still from the town where we planned to spend the night.

We divided up the chocolate candy, a little fuel to keep going down the road. I heard the truck before I saw it. Looking up, I watched it near us and slow down to a stop. As the fogged up passenger's window rolled down, I looked into the dry enclosure of the truck. Inside, where the heater was probably blasting, sat a man in his blue denim work shirt and a woman wearing a mauve t-shirt under a thin cotton sweater.

I imagined the couple's conversation as they spied us on the horizon, two shapeless neon forms. Huddled, slightly to avoid the rain. As the truck approached, the people inside saw our black pants, our ankles revealed, coats that hang down to our upper thighs.

"Hon, what are those folks doing?" she said.

"Where?" he asked.

"Over by the side of the road—"she said.

"Bad day to breakdown— Where's their car?" he asked.

"Are they walking?" she asked.

In reality, the truck pulled over, the window rolled down, and we watched the steam blow off the truck's hot engine and the windshield wipers fling off water. That was when they saw our bikes tipped on the ground and our feminine faces tucked into the tent-like holes of our raincoat hoods.

"Nice day for a ride," yelled the man.

"Where are you headed?" asked the woman.

"We're biking to San Francisco from Boulder Colorado," said Scarlet as she pulled down her hood, the water hitting her face, dripping off her nose.

"Do you want a ride over the pass?"

"No, thanks," oozed Scarlet, all English accent and American smile. "We'll ride our bikes."

"Are you sure?" the woman asked.

"Yes, thank you so much," Scarlet said.

"Well, stay warm."

"Be careful," yelled the man, throwing on the turn signal.

"Thanks, though—" I said, as they maneuvered back onto the road.

By the end of our chat, my M&Ms were nearly dissolved into blue and red and yellow puddles around the lumps of chocolate. At that point in the bicycle journey, there was no question. Scarlet and I would refuse the car ride.

The day progressed and rain thickened, spewing thunder and lightning. Clouds congregated at the top of the mountains that started out in the distance but grew close as we rode towards them. We moved closer and the clouds stayed in place, thick, vaporous and beastly cold.

Winding up the mountain road, the wind stirred. Up the hill, down the hill, a cycling journey is simplicity in all its form. Where were we going? There, to the crest of the mountain pass: red brown, dirt brown, burnt sienna ground. The balsam blue and

the yellow green of the high desert plain. Turquoise highlights on the tips of the pine trees, even an occasional tawny red in the bark. A bird looking down saw us pause at the pass, and then begin to ride along a plateau before seeing the gorgeous frosting of mist covering a providential vista. The bird circled once, twice, watched us stop before winging to the left, away from the uncertainty of foamy clouds.

Beauty is by its nature unexpected. Surprise blushes the cheeks, gilds the spectacle with gold. On the top of that mountain, it felt as though my eyes became my body because I was so absorbed in seeing. I saw the road as it wound down below the clouds, the steep grade, black, wet and treacherous. But there was nothing to distract from the complete sanctity of that moment. Heaven and earth and I was the bridge that looped the gap.

The hail and mist-covered vista outside of Dillon, Montana, on the twenty-fourth day of our journey stood as the pillar of salt from which I couldn't look back. I've tried to re-see that hill, to recapture the moment but memory and words are dry rags. Landscape evolved slowly, painfully, thoughts repeat and people from the past recycle into the present moment. Through Northern Colorado, over the Rockies, into Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Eastern Oregon, finally the West Coast, landscape took days and days to progress into new zones. The relative emptiness of the skyline a blue screen for my overactive mind, imagination, voices, and emotions.

I was looking for beauty the whole time. Scarlet and I were looking for the beauty that it takes a whole lifetime to imagine, much less see. Twenty-six years old and Scarlet age twenty-three. For one moment, the world merged into a complete realization. And then standing in front of the gorgeous cliff of forever, the light changed and I lost my way.

I pulled my bicycle from its resting place on the road and balanced it upright again, throwing my leg over the top tube. As my bike slipped against my body, I pulled both fingerless cycling gloves onto my hands, attached the velcro, and fastened my helmet. I threw looked over my shoulder, and saw Scarlet mirroring my actions out the corner of my eye.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

I sat onto my bike's saddle and leaned onto my right foot, flat on the ground. Then I lifted my left foot to clip into one pedal. Finally, in the last movement before departure, I swung the weight of my body into the center and clicked my right foot into the clipless pedal. Instantly inertia sunk into my wheels and we descended downhill, 5 mph, 10 mph, eventually hitting 50 miles per hour into the great beyond.

How much do we smolder? How much do we attach ourselves to various ideas, when really we are fluid as water, in all its forms? Hail, one minute a fleck of dust that collects the moisture in a cloud. A fire seething is neither smoke nor blaze, it is caught in between two states. We are not paying attention. On Day 24, a hill caught our eyes and held them tight. Shunryu Suzuki, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, said, "When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself." A fire burns, doubt smokes and never catches.

A moment like a hail-covered hill is happenstance, like the first burn of a needle piercing unsuspecting flesh. There's something about bicycling in the rain, something about seeing more clearly. When I worked as a bike messenger in San Francisco the first time in 2000, from January to March, it rained nearly every day.

During that time I lived alone for a month in a subletted studio on the second floor of this amazing Victorian on Steiner Street. Tracy, the woman who leased the apartment, never ate. Her leathery face-skin stretched over her bones and strange fur sprouted out from her face. Telltale anorexic. No food on the shelves, one pot, and some coffee in the freezer. No heat. No shower, instead a clawed bathtub. No posters on the walls, but a huge cracked mirror propped up. No phone. Tracy found all her furniture on the streets, which might have made the place feel shabby, but she kept it stark. Heard about the place from a flier at the San Francisco Zen Center.

"This is a great place to figure things out," she said, before leaving for Santa Fe. She just wanted the place back exactly as she left it, and made sure to remind me not to leave anything behind, like shopping bags or food in the fridge.

After messengering all day, I liked to come home exhausted knowing I'd have a refuge. With views. A garden with ancient succulents. The bay on clear days. I liked the

place because Victor, John Cooper, Joe and Damon were only a few blocks away, spread out through the Lower Haight. Shwermas at Ali Baba's Cave, and Bean There's lattes. Zen Center just a few streets down.

Zen Center. Went to their Saturday morning lectures for the free cookies and tea. Mindful pecan or chocolate-chip cookies. Then out to brunch afterwards on Haight Street. A little sitting, a little listening, then gorged myself on ginger peach French toast at Kate's Kitchen, directly across from Victor's apartment. Nothing too serious.

But the rain started to get to me. Cold and wet all day, riding around, my feet feeling like they had some sort of jungle rot. Cold apartment. Cold city. Dumped on Valentine's Day and no heat. And one day the casual Saturday morning lecture sunk in.

A sixty-something Zen nun who could almost pass for a man with her cropped hair and robes discussed a section of Dogen's *Genjo Koan*. She first explained that Dogen wrote the koan in a letter to one of his students, and that he brought Buddhism from China to Japan. She read some of the *Genjo Koan*, from a section called "Actualizing the Fundamental Point":

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, you do not return to birth after death. Birth is an expression complete this moment. Death is an expression complete this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring.

Six months before discovering Zen Center, my friend Jeb died in a car crash in Mexico. Twenty-one. He made art, had just come out, and we wrote a poem together before I graduated and he left to study abroad. His death made me decide to pursue grad school, become a writer for his sake, to dive into sexuality, to dive in to the whirl and thunder and song. Because it's fleeting. And here it was winter, waiting to hear from grad schools, nothing seemed able to take hold, my bike sliding out from under me, my own anonymous pair of legs on a green bike, who could get hit and dragged under a bus in two seconds flat and still end up getting cursed by the driver.

Who was I? I was ash, birth, death, winter and I wanted spring. I felt cold, the deep wavering depth of cold and mourning and loss, I felt it all in one rush biking past

a needle exchange that was set up in the Duboce Bikeway, where junkies bought their shit and shot up. I'd been warned by a messenger never to ride that shortcut because there were always needles on the asphalt. I walked past the blue tent and the table and the red plastic barrel marked contaminated waste and the small throng of wastrels and the mist and I felt death and no-death. Like all that mattered was seeing.

Because ash cannot again become firewood. Because fetus cannot again become mother. Because the needle does not replace the vein. Because the needle against the vein, water falls. Water falls like rain lubricating the train tracks that run past a blue EZ up tent. Underneath a red barrel overflows with death that is not birth because the end of winter is not the beginning of spring.

Just like hail is not rain and mist is not ice. Why did Scarlet and I see the perfect beauty of the hail? Why did the junkies exchanging their needles on the Duboce Bikeway stay with me? Because my bicycle slowed my eyes down enough for me to see the beauty that is always there. And my bicycle exhausted my physical body enough so that my eyes could stay in tune with my body and my immediate environs. Both scenes arrived after I biked up a hill.

Maybe the hill made the beauty. Or perhaps it wasn't the sights themselves that made the impact, but the feelings. Usually, I spend my time blurred-out and dulled by anxiety and a generalized (though unacknowledged) fear of mortality. Especially on our bike trip there were 84,000 reasons to be afraid. But during the two moments when I finally integrated mortality into my daily understanding of the world, beauty arrived like hail dissolving on a hillside, dying to be seen, thrilling to be alive. My beauty, burning to become, with death and no death.

Front Porch Light

Going out to replace the bulb, I hear a man
Across the road yelling into a parked car's window.
He moves in a tiny patch of light, tossing his ball cap
Hard onto the concrete like it is burning him.

You are a song, I think as the car backs away
From him and speeds off. Standing in the dark
I hold my perfect glass bulb. I know
I'm not fixing anything, but I don't want to leave.

I watch him measure the hurt,
Trace it on blacktop and turn. He finds it again.
I have been this man. I have cried
And slouched into breezeways, winced
As my flesh cooked itself like a fish
In thick crystals of salt, served to those
With over-pronounced, unapologetic appetites.

He is waiting and now, I want the light on.
Yes, I want to have just come out the door,
And so I unscrew the spent bulb and replace it.
The light runs to him like a child. He awakens,
Goes in, slamming the screen door behind him.
I take his place, watching the dark by this torch.

Fabio Sassi

Broker Heart



S.V. Meyers

Another Mary

The blood is mostly gone now. No one ever told me how it would be: so bloody I thought the whole world would flush red. Red as the Sea of Moses, splitting my consciousness in two.

But Joseph is pleased. He sent a stable boy to clean up the mess. The boy brought an old woman who took the colored straw and the afterbirth and burned it right out here by the stall, so I can still smell it: the stench of blood and burning hay. I imagine there's a little ring of burnt soil there now. A blackness that is mine, my symbol: the smoldering fires of afterbirth. Because now, at least, my body is free.

I cannot think why Joseph stays here, except to punish me. He is righteous. He will be kind and good. He will raise this child, even though, I have told him, there are women who would take it. In this very city. Barren women. Cursed women. But none more cursed than me.

It is screaming again. Joseph will bring it to me, and I will have to feed it. Again. Again a minor invasion of the body: I must hold the head of this child to my breast so he can eat me alive.

There isn't much food here. I half hope we will all starve—but that is temptation speaking. Because I do not want to live with this punishment; I do not want to learn to love this child.

#

He came to me in the fields. I had stopped to rest, to finger the flowers there in a narrow meadow by the stream. He surprised me, how beautiful he was. He said I was his chosen one, so pure and bright. Let him touch my skin, he said. Let him kiss just one smooth wrist or turn of brow. Pure, bright. He said he was an angel.

I did not know how to say no. I wanted to please him, powerful as he was. *So pure, so bright.* He carried a little lantern, lit even in daylight. He said it was his watchman. He said we must be careful. He said to meet him the next day there by the river.

And I knew it was wrong. I knew my husband was coming soon; the one who had been chosen for me. But he was holy, and nameless. He said Gabriel or Septimum; he said calla lily and chrysanthemum. He said he could link me to the heavens. And I believed him. I thought he could free me. He told me he would take me away. Before my husband came. I believed him.

My father, I thought, would choose an evil man. He would do it out of spite. He would seal his hatred there. But now Joseph takes this babe from my arms. This six months babe that is too large. Perhaps he will take me back to my father. Refuse me: tainted goods. And that would be punishment, too. Because I know where hell lives; I have been there. And there are angels in hell. I know this, too.

What you don't know is that I was the last of seven children; all the others were boys. My mother died giving birth to me. Because I was cursed, my father said. Because I was sinful from the beginning. And for the shame of it, my family dressed me in men's clothes. They cut my hair. They cut me down and made me work. I was lesser, and they knew it. When the boys reached manhood—one after the other—they remembered that I was woman. They remembered it, one after the other.

But Joseph does not send me back. It's been three days now: three damp days in a stable with nothing to eat. The infant cries and cries. But Joseph is poor—poorer even than my father. So we wait.

On the tenth day, they arrive, three men with gifts of food and charms. It's the baby they've come to see, and I realize Joseph is not the fool I thought he was. Holy, they call him, Holy baby Jesus. Hold him to the light, compare him to a star. A star fallen to earth, a gift from God. They turn to me and bow. They kiss my bloated, stinking feet. Pour wine across my lips and whisper, "Mary Mary Mary."

#

It's the gold that delivers us, buys us a donkey out of Bethlehem and enough food and clothes to sustain us. I never ask Joseph how it happened: who those men were, or how he knew that they would come. My husband is a cautious man. He would tell me to be quiet; he would tell me to believe in things larger than myself.

When we stop, it is in another city. Joseph is not a farmer, like my father. In this new place, he takes a room, finds work and sets up a lathe. This will be our life. And now I am no longer afraid: Joseph will keep me. He seems content; he is a simple man. I think he yearns for nothing more than wood and sand, a babe at home and a woman to care for it. Perhaps he has been married before; he is a man with years behind him.

The women in this town wear long, narrow faces; they are not a happy people. Their leader, they whisper, is cruel and corrupt: Great Herod on the Hill. They need a source of hope. A lantern, a pure and beautiful light.

These women come to the house to welcome me. They are curious. They have heard, somehow, that my child is special. "God loves him," they say, one to the other. And smiling, they leave figs or grape vines at my table.

My days move slow; the nights are loud with memory. I see white silks when I close my eyes. I see a pair of sandals in the grass. And perhaps you will wonder how I can still want him—that other man who also misused me. But you must understand: he was all that was beautiful in my life; he was all that I had known of escape. I had thought that he would be like the others, but I did not know what he could give. I did not know about careful hands: hands that touch and touch and want to bring something to life. A flame in me, a dimension of self unfolding. Afterward, in my father's house, I kept dreaming: those hands widening into the wings of gulls, my body widening into the sea.

Shame. You'll say I should be ashamed, thinking these things as I lie with a husband who does not want me. Who keeps me out of duty, but won't sully himself with my touch. And the child in the other room, that I refuse to love—but that I would not part with for the world—because of how he came to me.

So I suppose this is my punishment: these women who come to the house and keep coming. Wondering over the child. Saying things no woman should ever say about a child: God things, promise things. Things no child, or mother, could ever fulfill.

It's foolishness, I tell them. It's false, and dangerous. It is dangerous to make such lies so public. Someone will hear them. Someone who does not like these lies. And what then?

#

When the news reaches us, it comes from everywhere: a folded scrap of leather, words written above a door. *You must leave*, they say. *You must save the child*. It's an exodus—all of us, young families, one or two children only—and it costs us the rest of our gold. No one is selling mules or crates for moving; too many people have left already. But the town is beginning to believe that Herod will do it. The rumor passed about in the night: he will take your infants; he is crazy; be careful. Perhaps it is jealousy; perhaps he has heard something he should not. But the people are beginning to believe it, so we leave.

#

The next township is smaller. No one comes to greet us. No one has heard of the freight we carry: a child too blessed to be ignored. And again the lathe, again the small but sufficient room. This time, though, we are poor. Joseph goes to work for someone else, and I take in rich women's wash to do each week. We must earn money quickly; our young son is growing.

By four years old, Jesus is already talking with strangers. He tells them what he can see about their lives, and they thank me for what he has said. It troubles me, the way he draws attention to himself—the way he has so easily becomes a spectacle again—but what can I do? There are linens to deliver, linens to pick up. I take him with me on my errands through the streets of town. We become known; people wave and smile as we pass. And Jesus waves back, his small eyes steady with understanding. He watches me with those same firm, even eyes, so I know that I can trust him. He will not fall from a window or rush out into the streets. He is a child without a child's impulses. He is what mothers pray for.

Still, I cannot say that I love him. But I do not withhold from him, either. I give him what I have: protection and nourishment. I sing him the songs that I remember from the fields. I hold him, touch his small feet and intricate hands. I do everything a mother should.

But I am not watchful. I have grown too comfortable with my son's easy nature. And so one day it happens: I lose him. Nowhere, nowhere that I look is he hiding. No place I can think of that we have been that day. I check our worn paths to the markets, to friends' homes. Ashamed, I dart behind corners when people approach; if they see me alone, they will know he is missing. And what will Joseph do? Still, the old fear: the dark threshold of my childhood, a swinging lantern in daylight. And it is then that I think to pray. I have given over to an angel once, and perhaps he will help me.

God hears me. For the first time in my small life, he hears me: When I fall headlong into the temple, Jesus is there.

What would any mother think? Tell me, what should I have thought? A group of men surrounds my son. Important men. They are listening to him, their eyes calm as sheep. What are they thinking? Can they believe whatever it is he is telling them? And my son, I have never seen him so alive. He sits on a small stool, his arms spread wide: he is telling stories. Some of the words I catch—love, goodness, sacrifice—alarm me. These are words I've heard before.

This is the part of the story you haven't heard: I screamed. There in the temple, in the stillness of an afternoon, I collapsed screaming into a shaft of light. It was enough to break the spell. My son stopped speaking. His listeners fell around me, a woman fainted on the floor. *Lily, light. Oh promise pure and bright.*

I take my son home in silence. He does not speak, but I am certain he hates me. Hates me for what I can't give him. And it is that day that I stop touching him. He is old enough, I tell him, to do things for himself. To stay at home while I go out, or to join his father at the shop.

Three nights pass before I tell Joseph what has happened. It scares me, I say, because of what I know. They will watch him, listen to him; but one day they will grow tired of it. And then what will we do?

In the corner, I hear our son's breathing. He is asleep, I hope. I do not want him to know that he frightens me. I do not want him to understand what has been done.

#

When we move again, it is to a larger place. More room to move around in, my husband says. More chance to stay anonymous. And he takes Jesus to his new shop. He will train Jesus for a trade, give the boy a focus. But I know what I have seen: my son's passion, and his listeners' awe-struck faces. They won't know how to deny him; they will be seduced.

I still do not know what holiness is, but I have begun to pray. After the event at the temple, I have decided to believe in something; even if God is not just, He is there. In this city, Joseph does a good business. God hears me. In this new home, no one watches me in the streets. God hears me. In this new life, Jesus is hushed; perhaps God knows what this means.

And by now I am not what I was. I am growing older. The lines on my hands and face are my relief: I am no longer young and beautiful. Pure and bright. Finally, I can escape desire's long and aching grasp.

But still there is my son. Each day more beautiful, my son. I turn my eyes away from him. Weep into the laundry I wash. So pure, so bright. If he were to ask me for anything—*love me, love me, mother*—how would I deny him?

The slow beads of time pass. I am blessed with friendships in this new place. One woman's daughter is getting married. Joseph and I will go to the wedding. We will bring Jesus. It is the gracious thing to do.

But how could I have known? Months have trickled into years since we came to this city. Joseph and Jesus have carved their wood, worked in quiet corners together, and made us a life. How was I to know that the spirit still moved my son? How could I have guessed that water so easily becomes wine?

Joseph says nothing. Calm as always, he asks later that night, *Shall we stay in this place?* He knows my fear, knows this will not be the end of it. But the next day, Jesus is changed. He is angry, disgusted. "Thank you," they'd told him. "How clever, how useful." But Jesus wants something more than clever and useful.

I have become the mother of a man. It does not seem possible. But my Jesus is a man. He knows more than I do. More even than his beautiful father. He says little during the weeks after the wedding party, but I can guess at what he's thinking: about his life, about what he will do with his talents. And it is a path, I see, that will be permanent, whatever he decides.

We have money, Joseph and I. We have a home, and a son who could marry and leave us any day. Stability, a life of age: these are the things we have now. But I am still washing clothes, still worrying at stains in cloth because it soothes me, gives my tired mind something to do. Like Joseph with his wood. All the dark curls of whittled bark like waves of stiff water at his feet.

#

I do not hear him come in. The man in the daytime. The man who never visits me here, at my wash basin, at this hour of the day. He is so quiet, so soft. He is upon me before I realize that he is here at all. There is no chance of escape. I feel it as I felt it years ago—one man after the other.

"Mary," he says. "Mary, Mother." Then he folds me into him, into his arms, his chest. He touches my feet, my intricate hands. My son. Jesus. He tells me about my life. "Mother," he says. "I know your grief." *Lily, chrysanthemum. Lantern in the dark.* "I know why you are in pain." And he holds me, pours water across my lips and whispers *Mary, Mary, Mary.*

And then I knew a little of what holiness is.

#

This is the part of the story you don't know: I was his first real miracle. No one remembers, but it is true. After my son forgave me, I knew that I could love him—the way mothers love children, sisters love brothers, humans love the hand that created them. We were two parts of the same being: red walls closing in over the same narrow path. And so I gave him to the world, because that was how much I loved him.

#

So they will call me Virgin. And they will call him martyr, Savior, Messiah. This is the way history gets it wrong—and gets it right. I was a used woman; I was opened to the universe and returned, shaking, to my own small skin. I was a saved woman. And he was my son. He was a man who knew what touch could do.

When they killed him, it was not the way you think. I was not quiet; I was not holy. I broke open the temple gates and screamed headlong into them. I fell at the feet of powerful men. I opened my small body to the universe and called out *Gabriel!* *Septimum! Now, if you want it, take all that you can!*

But still my son suffered. They held him down. They pierced his feet, his intricate hands. Poured stale liquor across his lips. And in his last breath he whispered *Mary, Mother. What have we done?*

Eleanor Bennett

Ice and Mesh



Soil

I haven't closed my eyes in weeks—
a lie—but every time I do, I startle from sleep.
I rise like a bird against a thickening sky,

clouds building from shadow into
thunder. I love two people who
have tumors growing in their brains,

darkening and creeping while tissue
crumbles like last week's crocuses,
once hopeful against the snow.

I am loath to think of digging rectangles,
of covering them with flowers, of
rearranging stones. I think I want

to go home, but I'm as close to that
as I can get. I put down roots where
I am, belong there as long as I

can, move reluctantly if at all,
a bear shaking off a long sleep,
my eyes still buried deep in pale skin.

I hope to flower—April in New England
is flowers, yes, and rain, graying skies

that do even more than they threaten,

turn tender roots black with slime, send
dirt sloughing into the gutter and leave
the garden thick, sucking mud.

Kilean Kennedy

Review of *Ablutions*, A Novel by Patrick DeWitt

A novel set in a bar is predestined to involve a lot of boozing and probably a fair amount of flat-out depravity, be it of the mind, soul, or even body. And Patrick Dewitt's sharply registered novel *Ablutions*, his first, does include heavy dosings of outright degeneracy. The action takes place in a grubby Hollywood watering hole that resembles "a sunken luxury liner of the 1900s" and this is where the narrator spends his evenings and earns his pay, his regulars serving as the primary characters and focal points. Included among this group are teachers, crack addicts, former child stars, surfers, transvestites, and a man that likes to dress up as a police officer but instead of a gun his holster carries a Zippo. What keeps this all from becoming another in a long and exhausted line of over-indulgent books about drunks, or a Bukowskian screed writ small for the 21st century (any comparisons to that particular author fade from thought after page one), is first and foremost the enticing voice of the author.

Reading any part of *Ablutions*, it's hard not to imagine there is indeed a heavy strain of autobiography in the pages, but Dewitt is such a terrific writer – funny, smart, and not without a touch of the poet – that the sources of his material are uninteresting by default. At times his book reads almost like narrative poetry and a lot of this has to do with how Dewitt wrote it, using the second person *You* voice and shaping the whole book as a series of brief notes. The prose reads like a set of instructions to a future self, certain sections even beginning with the word *Discuss*, as in, "Discuss Monty and Madge, a pair of drifter types made strange and unknowable by a lifetime of vodka and cold shoulders."

It's a choice by turns stylistic but also functional: the perspective helps Dewitt blanch any darker tones of hopelessness. Self-pity, no matter how spare here, is for the most part removed from the story and is instead subtly implied. A narrator that continuously refers to himself as *You* is able to foster a sensation of judgment without ever having to fully cast it.

As for story, there isn't a lot to keep the reader guessing here, other than wondering if the narrator is going to 1) survive his latest binge and 2) get caught after he decides to start skimming from the till, finally saving up enough cash to go on a roadtrip in hopes of drying out. No matter, this isn't a book to read so much for story as it is for a chance to lounge around in the mind of the narrator, his insights always vivid, much like his descriptions of the regulars:

He plays the Rolling Stones' 'Memory Hotel' over and over on the jukebox, a song you once liked but which he has poisoned for you. He sings along, eager to show that he knows every word, and his tongue falls from his mouth like a tentacle, his gums like dirty purple curtains. His hair is short, with a part shaved into the side of his head: he has a silver dollar-sized bald spot to which he applies an egg-smelling cream, the scent of which oftentimes alerts you to his presence. His head bobs deeply as he drinks and his neck stretches long like caramel taffy on a pull.

Running counter to these unfiltered character sketches is an affinity for these very same people, which makes this world all the more appealing. More than once there's mention of the narrator falling "platonically in love" with people, usually following an act or gesture he sees, courtesy of his own refracted viewfinder, as true and genuine. One such instance occurs after the doorman, a mixed martial artist named Anthony, accidentally severs the thumb of a drunken patron while trying to slam a heavy steel door shut, unaware there's a human hand blocking the jamb from the other side. When Anthony finally realizes what he's done and sees the bloodied stump, he becomes overwhelmingly distraught and teary-eyed. Shoulders aquiver, Anthony tells the narrator, "I know how important a man's hands are."

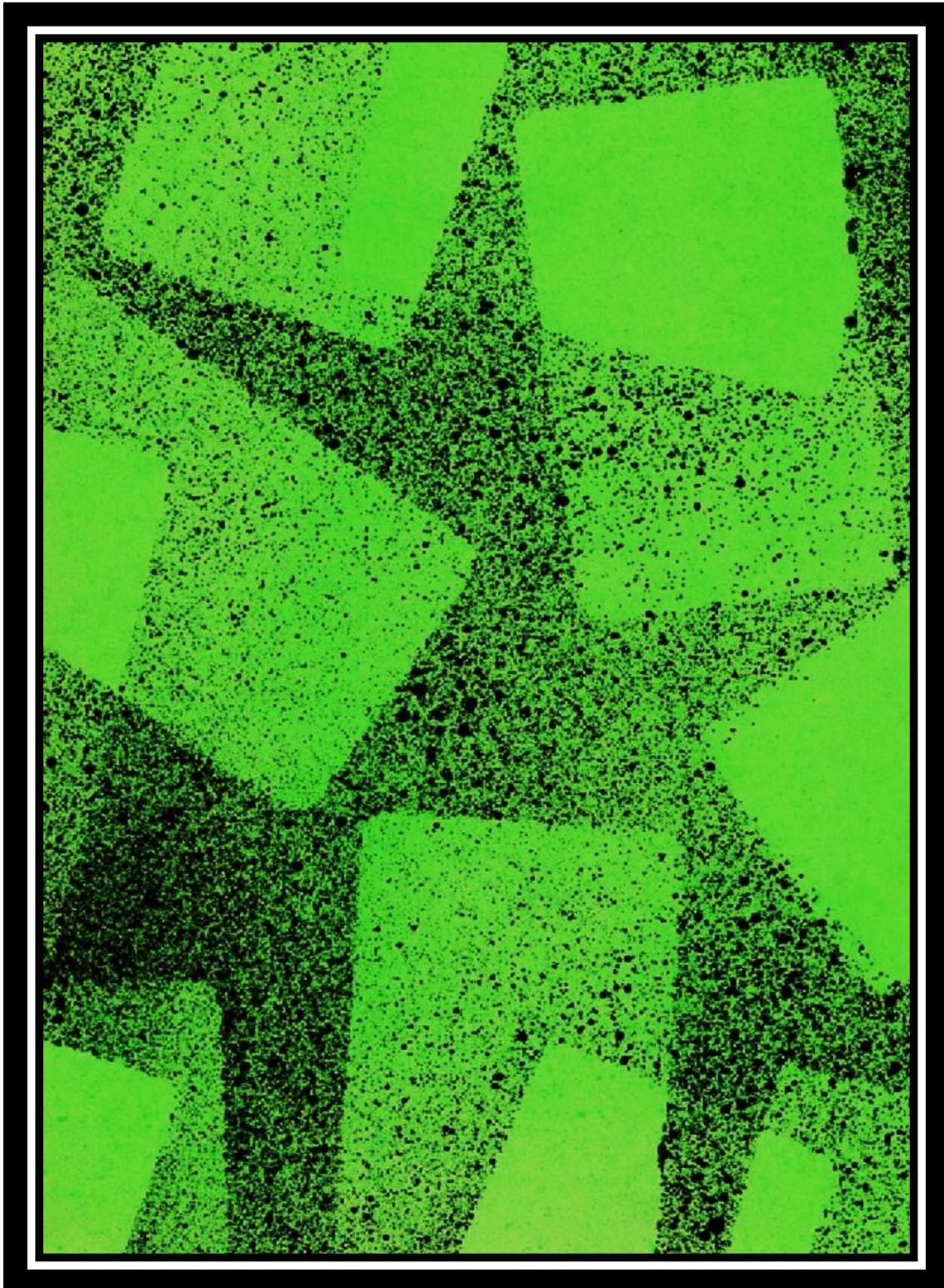
As the novel continues it generates an increasingly dire momentum that our nameless guide rides loosely on through to the end. Readers will certainly get the sense that this guy, this pickled bartender and artful scribbler of notes, is fully aware of what's

he's doing to himself, and he has zero interest in exploring the reasons for his likely ruination. There's little to no back-story or exposition to be found anywhere in the book. He sees, he feels, he knows, and he drinks. Man, does he drink.

DeWitt has recently published his second novel, *The Sisters Brothers*, which the marketing copy describes as a literary Western, featuring a pair of brother assassins. Not surprisingly, it's already gathered positive reviews in a lot of places; he also wrote the story and screenplay for the newly released movie *Teri*, about an overweight teen that cares for his invalid father and wears pajamas to school. Neither of these efforts, on a purely surface level, seems to have much in common with one another. But if *Ablutions* is a proper indicator, Dewitt's got a voice and vision that's well worth a long deep drink, or two.

Fabio Sassi

The Shadow of Money



Carolyn Moore

A Century-Old Elson's Pocket Music Dictionary Speaks Out on Isla de Vieques, Puerto Rico

" . . . the eastern tip of the island constitutes a region with more craters per kilometer than the moon."

—José Seguinot Barbosa

Fackel-tanz (Ger.): Dance with torches.

Unwilling partner freed from the embrace
of Navy planes drumming off-beat through air—
sixty years of bombing runs have ceased
to torch this shore. Also from German: *strafe*,
as in *Gott strafe England!* the gunner's curse
from World War One: God punish England now!
Punishment: blanks and lives and napalm strikes.
Torches? Which dancers failed to move in time?

Accopiáto (It.): Bound, tied, joined together.

Known as accidentals, sharps and flats
and naturals may join or stand alone.
Notes bound and chained together we call a chord.
Puerto Rico-USA: a chord
without accord in whatever key we say.

Coulé (Fr.): A group of two notes, connected by a slur.

The slur? Small Vieques, good for nothing else.

Which transposer slipped it between these keys:
Puerto Rico—useless—USA?

Groundwater stews and simmers in its pot.

Alphabet soup. A slurry cauldron bubbles

with RDX, NO₃, and TNT.

Dies irae (Lat.): "Day of Wrath," the Judgment-day.
A principle movement in a requiem.

In slow time, movement toward this principle:

ours were the voices that failed to sing in time.

Also from Latin, *ubi sunt* for "where
have they gone," the mangroves, seabirds, crabs, and fish?

Bahia de la Chiva's coco groves?

The years of bombing over, what remains?

Bio Bay lives on in luminescence—
natural light that's neither sharp nor flat.

Its micro-organisms leave their trails
of neon blue whenever they're disturbed
far from craters of the actual moon.

We hear between the ledger lines
those grace-notes needed if we're to keep at bay
the stain of Apony: dumbness, loss of voice.

Eleanor Bennett

Feather on Bone



Advice to the New Groom

The King meets many new people each year.

He can't be expected to remember them all.

We are here to aid him with his memory.

As such we remind him of names he should

know and events he should recall,

so that people think he remembers them.

We are also charged to help him remember to forget

unfortunate occasions that should never have occurred

lest someone who wishes him ill tries to infer they did.

Sometimes, the King, being human, forgets himself

giving rise to very delicate subsequent occasions when

the King must both remember to remember and to forget.

Gary Lehmann

Strange Bedfellows

Before Ho Chi Minh

became supreme military and

political leader of North Vietnam

he worked as a pastry chef in London

making

crusty baguettes,

croissants,

crepes,

éclairs,

and

cream puffs.

William Pomeroy

And where did our sages get the idea that man must have normal, virtuous desires? What made them imagine that man must necessarily wish what is sensible and advantageous? – Dostoevsky

We need vices. We need vices. Will someone open my marriage license? – "Vices" by Brand New

I. Connivance

We need vices.

Will these three words suffice—that is, to trigger an inquiry significant at bottom? Of what does such an inquiry consist? Perhaps one ought to say with the average professor that a “good” or even a “fine” inquiry effectively answers its own question and demonstrates the reason for doing so. That not every professor’s inquiry satisfies one of these requirements, let alone both, might suggest that “good” inquiries are more the exception than the rule, is not frequently explored. But in any case, the real question here should now be posed: Do we need vices?

Vices are personal tendencies of which someone cannot reasonably be proud. Must a lack of pride or even the presence of shame suppress what is unwanted? —The answer “yes” does not extend to all forms of personal expression.

Aristotle’s “virtue ethics” relied heavily on vices for determination, and theologians have regularly affirmed the necessity for evil in understanding the good. Such arguments, of which there are a great many others, indicate (since they are analogous) that Jesse Lacey’s demand—“We need vices!”—is by no means original. However, Jesse Lacey and Brand New’s method of *presenting* the issue is surely unique, and therefore it will now be described.

The opening track of Brand New’s *Daisy* is explosive, in a word; and yet it breaks no untouched ground *musically*, invades no boundary for creative technique not crossed

often—in life experience. Its opening barrage of distorted guitar only jars one into expecting more of the same, like the first shots in a battle. —“Vices” is from start to finish a song whose composition fits its thematic demand. The idea that “We *need* vices” is just as natural as the emergence of distorted guitar in rock music, and yet strangely more controversial, as a result.

But what is truly unique about this song, is that within it—unlike those of its predecessors who, as mentioned, assumed the presence of vices before using them as a means—Jesse Lacey makes a problem of vices *themselves*. This is also the decisive part. Instead of acknowledging them within a moral “system” indirectly, or affirming the need for vices within a deeper understanding of something else (another moral concept), Lacey focuses on them entirely, and asserts his demand: “We need vices.”

Appropriately, the announcement of this demand is no more volatile than the music surrounding it. A distant progression of faster guitar strokes answers the opening barrage, but nevertheless sounds protractive and mechanical. It now seems like the disruptive elements are battling with the usual, as though explosive music is clearing the way for an even more controversial demand. As if signaling defeat, a shrill yet hollow-sounding phrase rings out third, just before the percussion ensues, and from then on “Vices” is constantly loud.

“**We need vices! We need vices.** Will someone *open* my marriage *license*?”—These lines contain more than a high range of volume. When Lacey’s voice erupts and fills the listener, one knows that he has “surrendered completely to his passionate raging” (Kierkegaard). It is maniacal, panic-inducing; in any case, not just “hard on the ear.” Yet beneath these barbarous outbursts is a steady, everyday quality. The background arpeggios get noticed after they have already begun, and from their repetitive, continually high pitch the listener finds himself saying: “Right. Now it has happened.”

But the predictable subtleties of this song only reinforce its disruptive elements. Lacey’s juxtaposition of “safe” imagery with a demand for *vices* is particularly difficult to bear, and if taken apart, it almost seems worse than the alarm caused by his vocals. It all feels demonic because, with respect to its naming a marriage license and the

incessant guitar chords simultaneous, “Vices” is a song that “takes place under the disquieting supervision of responsibility” (*Ibid.*). In terms of its guitar work and lyrical references, there is a perpetual regularity to “Vices”—a steady, everyday quality in keeping with such notions as “responsibility.” Indeed. And yet the demonic overshadows it just as invariably. This contrast reaches its most sinister point during verse two, when Lacey jams both elements into a single line: “Where is my *trigger* and my *direction*?”—It is bad enough when something truculent crosses paths with a question that is customary, but when not even a breath separates them!—yes, then everything has gone terribly wrong.

II. *Exposure*

But is this kind of expression really that aberrant? Only if one is dishonest with oneself. Life is torturous. Everyone reacts to it uniquely, but no person with “an impression of his actual self” (*Ibid.*) can say that frustration, anger, resentment and rage were never present. On the contrary, such a person must admit that every one of these reactions occurred more frequently than he would have liked. Hence all of them are vices, and if one denies their influence upon him, dishonesty becomes, if you will, another vice for the list.

Frustration, anger, resentment and rage; these are the vices which Brand New’s song portrays. With human experience they are only too familiar, and since Lacey neither conceals these vices nor softens the blow, one cannot accuse Brand New of dishonesty. Instead, this band’s pairing safer effects with those particularly explosive uncovers a realism that few have witnessed. That is why one listening to “Vices” finds himself saying: “Now it has happened. —Now music has identified how *human* vices are.”

Often the “nocturnal voices” do not “fall silent”—the “demonic” coincides with everydayness more naturally than people like to admit (*Ibid.*). Such a presentation of

vices engenders controversy because it forces people to confront their own. Repulsion masquerades as controversy.

But should this response limit artistic expression? Certainly not. For what purpose does art exist other than to mirror the human predicament? Surely it is not meant to depict something “alien” to human experience, given that it arises *from* human experience and is created *by* humans. No, art reaches its most fruitful level when it reveals—a little more significantly for someone—what being human means. This capacity is what defines art. Its meaning distinguishes it from other endeavors.

From this it follows that music (an art form itself) should not *always* display what is comforting. It should not restrict itself to what makes people elated or what, through sadness or melancholia, is condolatory. Life is torturous. In reacting to what unfolds and catches us off-guard, we often disappoint ourselves. These repeated disappointments are called vices.

We *have* vices. Their weight is unshakeable. The most admirable person scarcely has time to convince himself that he is past their virulent realm, before another vice appears, the others still intact. If music is to portray what life entails, then yes—we do need vices. If vices are *entirely* absent from music, then music becomes—less than human by expression. Music that neglects an entire realm of human experience, is not art. It is a distraction.

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Eleanor Bennett

Sleep Anywhere



Codes to Crack

In a home unfamiliar, she waits downstairs for her lover, upstairs. Drawers scrape, water runs, bare feet paddle. Closing her eyes, she listens so hard she hears wind in trees. An Irish setter sprawls at her feet, licks down its leg, avid at the paw. The sound sickens and consoles: tongue slides in and out, up and down the red fur—absorbed in the task. All self-contained: fur, tongue, desire.

The Dawn of Falling Banks



All the Good

The body finds a method of betrayal

if given time. I'm pale

against the dusking of your reckless skin,

and all of this begins

—but we've begun already; long ago,

my hands began to show

you what I wanted. Tentative, I touched

your shoulder. Nothing much,

and nothing I could not explain if asked.

We both thought it would pass.

Instead, there's this inevitable kiss,

this aching slowness, this

whatever we are doing. I refuse

all definition. Choose

your euphemism if you need to make

a choice: your need, your ache,

your way to show yourself that you're still free.

But please, not *you*. Not *me*.

And if I practice long enough I'll find
the way to leave, though time

has proven useless. Think about me when
you can, and think again.

And I'll be trying not to think of us
for all the good that does.

Hypnagogia

Even though I couldn't move—my limbs weighed
down with everything I had learned to hold
or given away, a slab avalanche
while I struggled to breathe above it all,
the stars, as if someone had sanded off
the dark varnish of the night as we slept—

I need you to know I do not believe.

It wasn't male or female then—just *there*,
kindness of a troubled friend, a mother
listening for her child's breath in the night
after some simple devastation left
her with nothing else for reassurance.
Not these, not a creature that walks or needs
but still the creaking of a floorboard and
the feeling of a hand pressed to the door.

I need you to know I do not believe.

If I could have moved, I might have risen
from the run out where I lay not sleeping,
building snow fences across the downslope
of shifting night, of disinterested
stars. I might have risen, and put my palm
flat against the reliable wood and known.

I need you to know I do not believe.

A. Lucia Cravens

A Unicorn in My Closet

Part I

I woke this morning to my six-am alarm, a chime that gets progressively louder, hit snooze four times, lay in bed those forty minutes trying to figure out how the hell I was going to survive? I mean come on, enough already. Bills piling up with no way to cover them. Just laid off from a dead-end, minimum wage, crap job. Two bald tires. Chris not returning my calls.

The weight of it all pushed me down into the bed until I thought I might throw up. So I stumbled and tripped my way to the toilet, bent over, squeezed my face against the brackish water and forced myself to heave a few times. Nothing came up, although the knot of nausea remained—a knot that I imagined as an iron bust of Stalin. I took some deep breaths to break apart that thick mustached head. Imagined it blowing apart. No luck. Goddamned, monstrous Stalin waging war inside me.¹

So I turned on the shower and let the beating hot water cascade off me, trying to loosen the knots in my shoulders. After a minute of witnessing twenty-dollar bills swirling down the drain as the water meter tick, tick, ticked up, I took one step out of the three-foot square enclosure and towled off, another step out of the tiniest-bathroom-on-the-face-of-the-earth to look into my mirrored sliding closet doors (at least this rental had decent storage) and shivered at the sight of my sorry-assed self.

My personal hell, waking up alone at the crack of dawn to Stalin's tyranny, getting ready to look for work, any work, trying to survive, you know, to breathe, when lo and behold as I slid open the left mirrored door, standing in front of me, smashed inside my closet, a giant, golden-horned, white unicorn.

¹ I must take a brief side trip as footnote to explain why it was that I would imagine a knot just below my solar plexus produced by an overactive stressed-out mind as Stalin—without reading too much into it. You see, my Great Grandmother, Lithuanian, had been pulled off a street in Vilnius walking home one blustery day for denouncing in public said mustached tyrant and shipped off to Siberia. Work camp. Never returned. Presumably in a mass grave. So, Stalin...well...he was a dick (understatement) and I use him for my evil villain imago, my superhero fantasy, me vs. Stalin—but that's another story.

Part II

Immediate visceral reaction to fear. Pounding heart reverberated against the inside of my rib cage. Noxious sweat pooled in my pits. Pupils dilated, intensifying light from the crack in closed curtains plus 40-watt bulb in bedside lamp and image slowed to surreal (as if seeing a giant unicorn in one's closet isn't surreal enough). I nearly—lost control. I mean...what...I was nuts right? Hallucinating? Dreaming? All the quick assumptions made when faced with a unicorn in one's closet? Sure I liked fantasy as a kid, but not this much! And a unicorn? How princess gets married happily ever after lame! Jesus. What next? Rainbows and little flipping fairies?

So there I stood with my legs locked in a narrow upside down V under me, arms rigid by my sides, towel fallen into a circle of yellow puff, jaw slackened, mouth filled with sawdust.

The unicorn in response stared at me with its one exposed large charcoal eye, blinked its white furred eyelid lined with long, thick, black-as-absolute-nothing eyelashes. After a few moments of nostril-flared smelling, snorted hot, wet breath at me and then started lowering its head.

I'd ridden horses as a kid. I knew what the unicorn wanted. I raised my right hand (that shook like it wanted to play an imaginary tambourine) and placed it on the beast's fur (immediately my hand and arm calmed; the shaking stopped). Its white-as-cotton-balls hair like...like terry cloth...like I was caressing a giant stuffed unicorn with a shiny golden horn. That moved. And flared its nostrils. And snorted. And blinked. But that 6-foot tall unicorn with a golden horn didn't want to be pet like the horses from my youth. That unicorn instead lowered its head down low so that it pointed its horn at me, and before I could react, it drove that single golden horn straight through my stomach like I was made of butter.

Part III

I stayed locked in my rigid upside down V stance and blinked, remembering those white-haired eyelids with curtain lashes as my own. Slow orchestrated walls of black rope. Thunk, Closed. Whoosh, Light as image pouring in.

My heart didn't pound inside its cage; at least I didn't hear it (a vacuum at super low pitch seemed to have taken up residence in my head) and didn't feel it (I think that horn was full of some sort of anesthesia). No pain. No feeling. Just Thunk followed by Whoosh.

In front of me, floating in the air between me and the shoulders of the unicorn, one thought materialized handwritten, Cyrillic script, and a voice at the same time announced as if over radio, as if a world broadcast, *Сталин мертв.* I laughed. Kind of. More the dry actions of a laugh (since I didn't have any breath or voice), opened mouth, slight shaking of my torso, shoulders and head. And I cried.²

When my silent cry-chuckle ended, I let my head fall forward so that between the Thunk and Whoosh I gazed at the giant, white unicorn growing out of my gut.

Part IV

A twinge of fear. Kind of. Not really. More so, I think it was the neurons in the amygdala in my medial temporal lobes screaming, Help, Help, Help, I've been stabbed by a giant unicorn! The rest of my brain, though, floated in mountains of marshmallows, so the attempted howls, such as Get horn out, such as Hold blood in, Call 911, flitted across the gray-and-white-mattered landscape and died in sugary bliss.

² I must again take a brief side trip as footnote to explain why it is that I would laugh-cry at the words *Сталин мертв* (Stalin is Dead)—without reading too much into it. It is told that in the spring of 1953 when my great-grandfather and grandparents (then living in Chicago) heard the news of Stalin's death, they partied for three days straight, laughed and cried the entire time and nine months later, my father was born. I can't help but speculate, the crying laughter experienced at the obliteration of said evil mustached tyrant might, therefore, be some sort of cellular, DNA reverberation. Crazy too, my superhero fantasy...well...it morphed. Imagine a city, Tokyo perhaps, New York, maybe even Paris, probably Moscow. First we hear a deafening Boom Boom Boom, shaking us in our seats. A crushing and twisting of metal. Pandemonium. Mayhem. People screaming, Is it Godzilla? Is it King Kong? No, it's a gargantuan Stalin wrestling a 1000-foot Unicorn!

Instead or maybe in response to, my right hand still resting on the neck of the terry cloth unicorn contracted and released a few times, in effect scratching the giant magical creature growing out of my stomach before my knees started to give out. The golden horn held me up. The beast bore my weight.

My right arm dropped to my right side and with superhuman, shaking, adrenalin fortified strength, I lifted my head, no longer wanting to witness that white horse with horn skewering my viscera between the Thunks and Whooshes. But said superhuman strength being of short supply, my head reversed and fell backwards. My body followed, freeing itself from the unicorn.

I observed the cottage-cheese ceiling, each peak and vale, undulation, shadow, the olive-leaved vine that strung its peeling way around the ceiling's edge as border strip. Thunk. Whoosh. The poster of Mardi Gras New Orleans 1988, Michael Hunt signed print, its effulgent pinks and lavenders. Thunk. Whoosh. Dust motes that swirled and flickered in and out of the shaft of light. Thunk. Whoosh. I felt a tingle in my fingertips and toes spread and inundate each cell, each atom, as if I could sense the energy of shared electrons, ionic bonds, cells working, budding, dying, each in their timing, an orchestrated symphony.³

A distant whinny. A neigh.

As I hit the floor, not the floor made of the unforgiving manmade renewable composite whose patterns hypnotize, but the strawberry Jell-O floor that went with my terry cloth, golden-horned unicorn, I said, "Hey, that's okay."

³ My final side trip as footnote. Imagine the gargantuan Stalin gored by the 1000-foot Unicorn falls in measured, stilted frames, crushing the Kremlin or perhaps Saint Basil's Cathedral. Shattered bricks and concrete and glass hurl in a wide slow-motion arc. The screeching sound of crushing metal crawls up the audiences' spines. Hairs rise on necks. Then just as that audience can no longer stay contained in their seats, a Fugue in Bb minor, a Fugue by the Lithuanian composer, Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis, starts to emerge from the deafening resonances of destruction and prevails before the credits roll.

Eleanor Bennett

A Bet Top



Days

Most days are not ones to cherish,
anyone who tells you such cannot be trusted
around valuables or younger sisters. However,

the converse is just as untrue. Most days
are not filled with tragedy, and proponents
are equally untrustworthy and more dangerous

around younger sisters. Most days
are simple and silent in their coming
and going. They leave no great scar

or kiss on our cheeks. We rise
and move through the day unknowing
like silt drifting beneath the surface

of a river unaware of the squirrels
clamoring along the bank. These days
fit neatly inside us like the Russian dolls

my grandmother used to let us play
with during holidays. Each one
somehow able to wrap its shell around

the previous day without shattering
the whole collection. A delicate balance
held between the cherished and tragic.

Working at the Cannery

Once, I worked at a cannery hopeless as O'Neill's Hairy Ape.

Mostly high school dropouts, low incomes trying to survive
the brutal life of phobias.

I worked the subculture, third, shift clean-up crew.

Buck was a lead man, a joke management played,
savior to the clean-up crew,
a collective for their hang ups,
their sins.

All aggression ended at his door.

He forgave each trespass.

Buck feared frogs, something about the eyes.
Even so, we chased him spitefully, knowing it hurt.
No one cared for his nightmare.

Once he climbed to the roof of a loading dock, jumped
on a boxcar to avoid
cold, warty skin.

He cried,
begged,
pleaded,
pissed his pants;
we laughed.

Descending into that peculiar eccentricity,
my greatest fear was I'd be like them.
Then, the fact: I was.

Contributor Notes

ELEANOR BENNETT - Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 15 year old artist and photographer who won the *National Geographic* Kids Photography Contest and the World Photography Organization's Photomonth Youth award in 2010. She was the only person from the UK to be placed in *National Geographic's* See The Bigger Picture Photography Competition and the youngest person to be exhibited with Charnwood Art's Vision 09 exhibition. She has had her photography exhibited around the world in galleries in Europe, Asia and America and has been showcased in many magazines including the most popular children's magazine in the world, *NG Kids*. She takes all of her photography locally and loves to experiment with fusing contemporary photography with environmental and wildlife photography. Bennett uses a Nikon D5000 and a Panasonic FZ38. She has been doing photography for two years and has also won three national art contests with her mixed media work.

CHRIS COMPSON's poetry and fiction have appeared in *Louisiana Literature*, *Paradigm*, and the anthology *Hint Fiction*. He teaches English in upstate New York where he lives with his wife and dog, Elvis.

TASHA COTTER's work has recently appeared in or is forthcoming in *Salt Hill Journal*, *The Rumpus*, *Contrary Magazine* and elsewhere. Her fiction has been nominated for a *storySouth* Million Writers Award and she received her MFA in Poetry. She is currently at work on a futuristic young adult series about a government conspiracy to detain teenage witches. She has lived in Paris, Colorado, and Chicago and currently lives on the most beautiful farm in all of Kentucky. To read more of her work visit her online at <http://www.tashacotter.com/>.

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She lives in Carpinteria, California, with her husband and two sons, and writes about anything from rattlesnake bites to unicorns.

MAUREEN FOLEY - is bicycle-obsessed writer, artist and teacher who lives in New Orleans with Rua the dog and her husband, writer James Claffey. Her stories have appeared in *Wired*, *Santa Barbara Magazine*, the *New York Times* and *Urban Velo*. She worked as a bike messenger in San Francisco and published a portable guide to bicycle maintenance for SparkNotes, through Barnes and Noble Bookstore. "Smidge and Space Go West" is an excerpt from her memoir with the same title. She currently teaches English at Louisiana State University.

RUTH FOLEY- lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches English for Wheaton College. Her recent work is appearing or forthcoming in *River Styx*, *Measure*, *The Ghazal Page*, and *Umbrella*, which just nominated one of her poems for a *Pushcart Prize*. She also serves as Associate Poetry Editor for *Cider Press Review*.

KAREN L. GEORGE — Karen's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Still: The Journal*, *Blood Lotus*, *Vestal Review*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Wind Magazine*, and *The Cortland Review*. She's been awarded grants from The Kentucky Foundation for Women, The Ky. Arts Council, and was selected by Lee Smith as co-winner of The Janice Holt Giles Award. Karen holds an MFA in Writing from Spalding University, and teaches fiction writing at The University of Cincinnati's Commiversity. Her chapbook, *Into the Heartland*, is available from [Finishing Line Press](#).

JESSICA ERICA HAHN - lives in San Francisco, where she might be seen wandering over a hilltop with a baby on her back. In the predawn hours she's working on a memoir about her freight riding days, and a novel about seafaring hippies in the 1970s. She's a student in the MFA program at San Francisco State, and has several self-published titles to her name, something she's both proud of and slightly ashamed of. Some of her writing can be found at jessicaericahahn.com and hillbabiessf.blogspot.com.

KILEAN KENNEDY - was born and raised in the fine state of Kentucky and now lives in Durham, NC with his rowdy wife and kids. His short stories have appeared in such places as *Barrelhouse*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Mississippi Review Online*, *Word Riot*, *The Wrong Tree Review*, and a few others.

GARY LEHMANN- Twice nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*, Gary Lehmann's essays, poetry and short stories are widely published all over the world. Books include *The Span I will Cross* [Process Press, 2004] and *Public Lives and Private Secrets* [Foothills Publishing, 2005], *American Sponsored Torture* [Foothills Publishing, 2007] and *American Portraits* [Foothills Publishing, 2011]. Visit his website at www.garylehmann.blogspot.com.

BRUCE MAJORS - grew up in East Tennessee, graduated from Tennessee Technological University, and retired from the Tennessee Valley Authority. He has published poems in *Arts and Letters*, *Pinesong*, *The Distillery*, *River Poets Journal*, *Number One*, *Pirene's Fountain* and other literary journals. His collection, *The Fields of Owl Roost*, was named first finalist in the 2005 Indie Excellence Book Awards.

S.V. MEYERS - After growing up selling corndogs and cotton candy at carnivals up and down the West Coast, S. V. Meyers extended her gypsy habits into other lands, spending several years living in Chile, Mexico, and Costa Rica. Her work has recently appeared in *CALYX*, *Dogwood*, *Terra Incognita*, and *The Minnesota Review*, and it has been the recipient of several awards, including a Fulbright Fellowship.

CAROLYN MOORE - Carolyn Moore's three chapbooks won their respective competitions as has her book-length collection of poems pending publication from Deep Bowl Press. She taught at Humboldt State University (Arcata, California) until able to eke out a living as a freelance writer and researcher, working from the last vestige of the family farm in Tigard, Oregon.

WILLIAM POMEROY - is a young artist (he also writes music) struggling to find a stable way forward in his first post-college year. He studied philosophy at Salisbury University, wherein he began to analyze classical and contemporary music thematically, becoming the first in his department to incorporate both disciplines (philosophy and music). Obsessed with Kierkegaard, he has conducted research in Denmark and Norway, from which he plans to eventually complete a lengthy biographical work. In the meantime, another of his essays is forthcoming in Art Times, and several others are under consideration. Born in Cambridge, Maryland, he now spends the majority of his time in Greenwich Village—quite a transition.

FABIO SASSI - lives and works in Bologna, Italy. He's started making visual artworks after varied experiences in music, writing and photography, and has been very active in the mail art network over the last 20 years. Sassi makes acrylics with the stencil technique on board, canvas, old vinyl records or other media. His brushes are spray cans. When he makes an artwork sometimes he starts from the title that can be a word game or a weird assonance. Sometimes he browses his stencil patterns trying to match them to create an unusual or surreal composition. He is also inspired by the news and by the human condition and its shades. When spraying, he always has on a jazz or blues soundtrack.